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ABSTRACT

Standards for public libraries have undergone dramatic changes in the last decade. Traditional standards measured only "inputs," or what the community put into the library in terms of staff, books, funding, etc. However, these standards did not measure the services that the library produced, and, as a result, the Public Libraries Association (PLA) developed a series of publications that established a national standard for the planning processes and output measures for public libraries. In the mid-1980s the Public Library Development Program (PLDP) further developed these concepts and introduced two new concepts: library roles and nationally collected public library statistics. Although state standards for public libraries are more diverse than national standards as a result of each state's own unique context and their responses to national guidelines, newly developing national and state standards offer exciting potential. (MAB)

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Public Library Standards:
The Quest for Excellence

by

Amy Owen

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Public Library Standards: The Quest for Excellence by Amy Owen

The Quest: National Background

"What is a good public library?" "How do you know?" These are the questions that public library standards try to answer. Over the past decade, standards for public library service have undergone a profound revolution. Traditionally, standards were held to be authoritatively established criteria for assessing the quantity, quality, or extensiveness of library service. This concept was the foundation of the expert-derived, quantitative public library standards adopted by the American Library Association (ALA) prior to the 1970s. These standards were essentially "input" standards. They measured what the community put into the library--staff, books, funding, and so forth. They did not establish criteria for the services the library produced.

Yet over time, questions emerged. Were these standards to be understood as minimums or maximums? Could they be empirically verified? For example, why must a library serving less than 5,000 in population have 3 books per capita and not 2 or 2.5 or 4? Does having 3 books per capita really matter if those books are tattered and out-of-date? How could standards which had become "rules for sameness" be justified in view of the diversity among communities in the United States?

The answer to these questions revolutionized public library standards. In 1980, the Public Library Association (PLA), a division of the American Library Association, issued a landmark publication--*A Planning Process for Public Libraries*. This publication marked a new national approach to public library standards and was based on several key tenets:

- Decreased emphasis on quantitative standards;
- Recognition that a library's mission, goals, and services must be judged within the context of its community; and
- Continuous local planning and evaluation

of library services based on community needs assessment.

A Planning Process for Public Libraries was followed by *Output Measures for Public Libraries* in 1982. *Output Measures* established, for the first time, a simple, practical set of twelve measures to assess library "outputs" as opposed to "inputs." For example, service measures included: Circulation per Capita, Reference Transactions per Capita, In-Library Materials Use, and Document Delivery. Together these publications emphasized the point of view of the library user and the community: not the library budget.

National Context: The Public Library Development Program

Experience with *A Planning Process* and *Output Measures* led PLA to establish the Public Library Development Program (PLDP) in 1985. The PLDP further developed the concepts of the two earlier manuals and introduced two new concepts: library roles (a set of public library service profiles) and nationally collected public library statistics.

The PLDP resulted in three tools or components. *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures* (ALA, 1987) outlined a model for continuous planning and evaluation of library services. It defined eight basic library roles central to integrating community needs with the library's mission, goals, and objectives. The manual endorsed varying "levels of effort" as appropriate in library planning and provided numerous practical workforms to aid library planners. These two features, in particular, made it useful to small as well as large libraries.

The second tool was a new edition of *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (A, 1987). This edition expanded on the first by providing additional assistance to libraries in several key areas: determining which measures to use; understanding basic measurement concepts (validity, reliability, comparability); managing

data collection, analysis, and reporting; and interpreting and using measurement results.

The final tool, *Design for a Public Library Data Service* (PLDS), defined the data elements for a database of public library statistics. It reviewed technical considerations, established specifications, and made implementation recommendations. As a result, PLA did establish the PLDS the following year. This service now produces an annual statistical report and allows library directors access to a set of statistics (both input and output) from comparably sized public libraries.

The three components of the PLDP replaced the older quantitative standards. In 1990, the PLA Board officially rescinded its 1966 *Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems*. At present, the Public Library Development Program stands as the nationally recognized standard for public library service, a standard built around a new philosophy.

• The State Context: Variety is the Spice of Life

States have long established their own standards for public library service. Such standards, sometimes referred to as guidelines, appear in an amazing variety. One state has official standards with only six elements; another has ten. Yet several states have in excess of 100 separate standards elements, and two have guidelines with over 250 elements.

Why this diversity? State standards reflect a complex environment. Consider, for example, these questions. Who established the standard—a professional association, the state library? What is the standard based on—expert opinion, regulations, local needs? What level of achievement does the standard demand—minimum, adequate, average, maximum, a range? What types of measurement do the standards require—qualitative, quantitative, observation? To whom are the standards directed—individual public libraries, branches, systems? How are the standards used—as goals for achievement, to certify or accredit a library service program, to qualify libraries for state aid?

In addition, each state's response to these questions is uniquely shaped by its own context: its history of public library service, the organizational and political culture of state and local governments; patterns of library service; local government funding and the tax base;

demographic patterns; the degree of state financial aid for public library service; the presence or absence of library systems and so forth.

Prior to the 1980s, most state standards closely resembled the old national quantitative standards for public library service. Since the advent of the PLDP in 1987, however, 24 states have issued new standards and seven have standards currently under revision. Illinois revised its public library standards twice in the 1980s and Oklahoma three times. This intense activity is prompted by attempts to develop new answers to the question "What is a good library?"

The Local Context: The Search for Excellence

This new national and state approach to public library standards is challenging because it acknowledges that numbers alone are insufficient to characterize or judge an institution as vital, rich, complex, and diverse as the American public library. It is challenging because it recognizes that the question "What is a good public library?" must be answered uniquely in each of our communities. But in spite of, or perhaps because of this broadened vision, the PLDP and the newly developing state standards hold exciting potential. To quote from *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries*:

Excellence in public library service is not an idle dream. In spite of the multifaceted character of the nation's public libraries and the diverse communities they serve, excellence is achieved daily. As you work toward excellence in your library, three principles are worth noting:

- Excellence must be defined locally—it results when library services match community needs, interests and priorities.
- Excellence is possible for both small and large libraries—it rests more on commitment than on unlimited resources.
- Excellence is a moving target—even when achieved, excellence must continually be maintained.

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